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ABSTRACT

Sports and physical recreation activities have been part of American life since the days of the early settlers. Although the settlers were faced with problems of survival, accounts of life in the colonies in the 1600's carry mention of bowling in the streets, play with bows and arrows, and ice skating. Other activities to gain popularity before 1800 include snowball throwing, baseball, dancing, golf, cricket, sailing, wrestling, bathing (but not swimming), angling, and horseracing. (MM)

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Sports, Physical Activity and Recreation in Early American History*

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By 1776, the East was an amalgam of frontier areas and cosmopolitan coastal cities populated by religious and political refugees, slaves, indentured servants and freemen, both poor and wealthy. Settlers represented elements of German, Dutch, Portugese, Jewish, French Huguenot, English, Scotch-Irish and Negro extraction.[1] Such a diverse mixture of cultures would ensure the development of unique traditions in the new country. Geographically, it had been, and was destined again to be, a battlefield upon which nations vied for supremacy. At this time, though, the struggle concerned a group of envisioned people who hoped to discard the yoke of external authority and win independence for a fledgling nation to be composed of thirteen colonies.

Permit a look backward, a sort of over-the-shoulder glance if you will, and try to envision yourself as one of the early arrivals. Disembark from your ship after weeks under sail and look upon the new land "not beautiful at all but a bleak and dreadful wilderness."[2] An even more descriptive scene is set in Maine as revealed by the following:

> ...a scattered community grew up on the edge of the wilderness. It was long without government and the morals which prevailed were not of the highest order. The people devoted themselves principally to fishing.... They were roughly clad and coarsely fed. They lived in temporary shelters of logs, filled with clay, or in houses of one story, with thatched roofs and wooden chimneys. The impenetrable forest was behind them, the open ocean before them, and this was their highway and the chief source of their sustenance. They had no roads, and when they travelled by land to Massachusetts they crept along the seashore on the beaches, which were the first highways.[3]

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With all of the attendant problems such as existence must have presented, it is difficult to visualize keen interest in pursuing leisure time activities that had, perhaps, been a regular part of life abroad. On the other hand, perhaps because of the very struggle to live, leisure time pursuits erased the daily cares from their mind and gave them fresh hope. Perhaps it was just such a reason as this that in Jamestown, in a setting that could not have differed markedly from that described above, in 1611, Sir Thomas Dale found "most of the companies...at their daily and usual works, bowling in the streets...."[4] It is recorded that:

> Although the English were...aware of the effectiveness of the bow and arrow in the hands of the...Indians, there is no indication that the colonists made use of the same weapon.[5]

On the other hand, excavations at Green Spring, the Governor's plantation in the seventeenth century, have revealed parts of a light crossbow that was possibly used as a sporting weapon.[6]

This is not to suggest, however, that the children of that day did not have bows and arrows for their play just as many contemporary children have various types of weapons. There is a very interesting reference that gives evidence that "...an Indian bow and some arrows"[7] was sent to the son of Moreau de St. Méry from one M. de Liancourt. One of the couriers was M. Talleyrand who must have examined the bow and found it wanting because he wrote that "...the bow [whether authentic or not is not known] for your son which, neverless, is a poor effort (I speak of the bow)."[8] It seems illogical to assume that bows and arrows would not have been used by children for fun.

Besides the bow and arrow, settlers early on participated in ice-skating. In 1604, on an island in Maine a pre-Pilgrim Christmas was celebrated. The participants were French, among them was Champlain, and, while the recreation hall beckoned the older men, the frozen river called the young men for ice skating.[9] As the skill of skaters increased over the years, there were those

who practiced cutting figures in the ice. These designs or figures became more and more sophisticated until they were as "intricate as the lacy designs of Victorian anti-macassars."[10] Evidently, the caliber of American skating was good. Benjamin West, the painter and one of America's best known skaters, performed in London in 1772. During his exhibition he performed a "Philadelphia Salute." Among the spectators was Colonel Howe, soon to become prominent in the upcoming American Rebellion. He is said to have spoken to West saying, "You are just in time to vindicate my praise of American skating."[11] Such a compliment would probably not have been given had not the caliber of skating been good.

Often, accidents occur when people are skating. At these times the actions of the crowd are of interest. Moreau records the following incident:

> In the winter of 1793, while crowds were skating on the Delaware in Philadelphia, the ice broke and a young man disappeared. There was some screaming; and when, after a few instants, his head came up, he was pulled out and skating began again. A quarter of an hour afterward another skater disappeared and was drowned, but the skaters went right on skating with no show of emotion.[12]

Skating was a popular pastime but it also had its utilitarian value during the war. In an article about Robert Rogers and his Rangers, of French and Indian War fame, one reads that "often Rangers went into action against the horsedrawn supply sleds [of the French] on ice skates or snowshoes."[13]

While Ranger's on skates bothered the French, people throwing snowballs harassed the British in Boston. In other parts of the country snowballs were objects to be thrown at passers-by as well as children. Other institutions and activities were also prominent. One of the more interesting which developed during the colonial period was the tavern. As is the case today, some taverns were perhaps better than others. For example, the tavern operated in Portland, Maine, (the first one established there was in 1681)[14] by Widow Alice Greele was described as the "fashionable tavern of the town."[15] This tavern and the activities that took place therein are further described as:

> ...a low, one storied-structure, but was a famous place of resort for clubs and social parties. Here the lawyers, traveling or circuit, were entertained; here courts sat, and conversations were held; and here the wags of the town resorted,...many a mug of 'flip' was drank,...many a good joke cracked...."[16]

Jable[17] suggests that petitions were submitted to the Assembly seeking to control taverns in Pennsylvania. Carson, on the other hand, suggests that control of the tavern was established. He writes:

> In colonial America the inn, or "ordinary," dispensed malt liquors, wine and spirits, all regarded as "the good creatures of God," under the vigilant eye of a circumspect Ganymede who had been carefully chosed for his post by the justices of the county court or, in New England, by the board of selectmen, "as a Person of sober Life and Conversation" and therefore fit "to keep a House of Entertainment." The system of control was strict and even paternalistic. Hours, prices, such matters as gambling, cockfighting, and loud singing, were all the subject of legislation. Details were spelled out minutely. The objective was social order, but the licensing system was quite innocent of any abstract theory of social control. The ordinary was a forum and a community center, a place for genial self-expression, and for the traveller, a home away from home.[18]

Since the tavern, or inn, held a central place in early American life, it is not surprising that activities of various kind were carried on there. They were frequented by all classes of people on a relatively regular basis. In his journal, Moreau recorded the following:

> October 8 [1797] I went to dine at M. Brunau's country seat at the mouth of the Schuylkill. There I found Letombe, Flamant, General Collot and the Minister of Spain. The location was such that wild ducks contributed their persons to the dinner; and the game of skittles or ninepins, at which General Collot excelled, occupied us all day until dinner, over which we sat until we had to return to the city.[19]

Since people tend to do those things that give them pleasure or help them lead ordered lives one can readily understand another entry made three weeks later, on October 29th, that this visit "has become customary every Sunday."[20]

The game or sport of ninepins was brought to America by the Dutch and was played on a green. In 1732 an area in New York "was leased as a bowling green."[21] From these bowling greens the game gradually moved inside to bowling alleys.

Bowls is a relative of bowling. In fact, there was a time when the word meant ninepins as well as bowls. Instead of attempting to knock pins down, the intent was to roll the balls near a stationary ball. Spreading up and down the coast, bowls "was considered the leading sport until the Revolutionary War but after the war became practically non-existent for 100 years."[22] Bowling greens were located on the grounds of Washington's home, Mount Vernon, in 1732 and that of the Governor of New York. Surrounded by an iron railing, the bowling green "really embelishes this place."[23]

Baseball had a place in the sporting activities of the period. For example, about two hundred years ago a book, originally published in England and entitled A Little Pretty Pocket-Book, was reprinted in New York and Worcester, Massachusetts. In it is a reference to "Baseball" as a representative of the letter "B" in the alphabetical sequence of sports for children. English settlers were the most numerous in the colonies and since the book was reprinted here, the sport of baseball, in an 18th century form, was known and practiced as a colonial activity. Support is given to this position by three references. George Ewing wrote of "playing a base"[24] while at Valley Forge in 1778. In New York, boys left their "playing at ball"[25] in order to join the riots which were prevalent before the Revolution. Even college students, evidently, played ball because the faculty of Princeton, in 1787 "forbade the students to 'play with balls and sticks in the back common of the college.' "[26] Perhaps the students failed to strike a balance between sport and study because Moreau records that "at Princeton College,... sport and licentious habits are said to absorb the pupils more than study."[27]

For a moment let us change our clothes and go dancing. Dance seems to have been the most popular of all activities. Everyone participated. References tell of George Rogers Clark being entertained by villagers with a ball,[28] of Rocheblave, a British government representative, hearing fiddle music as well as the sounds of dancing, as he returned from a dinner in

New Madrid in 1778,[29] of Peggy Arnold's life of hops and routs,[30] and of the opportunity to dance with Lafayette.[31] There are some interesting contrasts depicted here. For example, Moreau, writing about free people of color and slaves, records that:

> Although they are never allowed to forget their dependent state, the free people of color and the slaves are not strangers to the pleasures of life, the dance and finery.
>
> It is chiefly on Sunday that they take advantage of the last. On that day they don their finest clothes, including boots and knickerbockers, and the women put on their brightest dresses and their prettiest shoes. They repair, particularly the Methodists, to church where their voices blend with those of the whites; the evening is spent in dancing, for which the Negroes have a mania.[32]

This reference suggests that not all churches frowned upon dancing. At the other extreme were the balls held, for example, to celebrate George Washington's Birthday, as well as for other occasions. In Philadelphia, at least, the classes were sharply divided. Eligibility requirements for attendance to some of these affairs required a certain professional standing.[33]

In August, in the Red Lion tavern outside of Philadelphia in 1794 there was a "Melon Frolic which brings together all the neighboring people to eat watermelons and dance."[34] Such a festival would accomodate the interests of most of the people. Dancing was an activity that was engaged in hours a day. Actually, dancing seems to be an activity fulfilling the basic philosophy of physical education. Moreau records:

> All American girls or women are fond of dancing, which is one of their greatest pleasures. The men like it almost as much. They indulge in this pleasure, either in the morning from eight to eleven, or [in] the evening from the end of the day far into the night.
>
> I believe I have already said elsewhere that dancing, for the inhabitants of the United States, is less a matter of self-display than it is of true enjoyment. At the same dance you will see a grandfather, his son and his grandson, but more often still the grandmother, her daughter and her granddaughter. If a Frenchman comments upon this with surprise, he is told that each one dances for his own amusement, and not because it's the thing to do.[35]

Although John Reid's golf course in Yonkers, New York has a significant place in golf history, evidence seems to place the origin of golf in America

at an earlier date. People living in New York were able to read an ad appearing in James Rivington's Gazette, on April 21, 1779 which reads:

> To the Golf Players: The season for this pleasant and healthy excercise now advancing, gentlemen may be furnished with excellent clubs and the veritable Caledonian balls by enquiring at the Printers.[36]

With that ad the record of golf in New York seems to have entered a holding pattern for a century. Farther South, in the Carolina's, more specifically South Carolina, the Charleston City Gazette and Daily Advertiser reported in 1778:

> There is lately erected that pleasing and genteel amusement, the kolf baan. Any person wishing to treat for the same at private sale will please apply to Mr. David Denoon in Charleston, or to the subscriber on the spot.[37]

Some twelve to fifteen years later notices referred to the South Carolina Golf Club. At approximately the same time there is evidence that the Savannah Golf Club had an anniversary in 1796 and that there was a Golf Club Ball in Savannah in 1811.[38] Whether or not these were continuous is not know.

Contemporary with those activities described above colonists and those who arrived later used their leisure time to participate in cricket, sailing, wrestling "a popular intramural sport at Harvard"[39] about 1780, bathing but not much swimming, angling (a club - the Schuylkill Club was founded in 1732 in Pennsylvania),[40] and horseracing.

Sport and physical activity was alive and well in America prior to 1800. There were forces, specifically the church, that attempted to control the actions of people but were singularly unsuccessful. How much better off we might be now if those who were concerned about sport, physical activity, and religion had realized that in a society where there is any degree of freedom, a person's behavior depends more upon an internal self-commitment than upon externally imposed restrictions.

Footnotes

1. James G. Leyburn, "The Scotch-Irish," American Heritage, XXII, 1 (December, 1970), 29-30.

2. Suzanne T. Cooper, "Summertime Revisited," American Heritage, XIV, 4 (June, 1963), 36.

3. Edward H. Elwell, Portland and Vicinity, rev. and illus.; (Portland, Maine: Loring, Short and Harmon, 1881), p. 9.

4. Ivor Noël Hume, "Digging Up Jamestown," American Heritage, XIV, 3 (April, 1963), 70.

5. Ibid., p. 73.

6. Ibid.

7. Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey [1793-1798], ed. and trans. Kenneth Roberts and Anna M. Roberts (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1947), pp. 201-202.

8. Ibid., p. 204.

9. Emmie Bailey Whitney, "Maine's First Christmas," Maine, My State (Lewiston, Me.: The Journal Print Shop, 1919), 39-40.

10. Dick Button, "America On Ice," American Heritage, XIV, 2 (February, 1963), 39.

11. Ibid.

12. Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey, pp. 272-273.

13. Jake T. Hubbard, "Americans as Guerrila Fighters: Robert Rogers and His Rangers," American Heritage, XXII, 5 (August, 1971), 83.

14. Elwell, Portland and Vicinity, p. 10.

15. Ibid., p. 20.

16. Ibid.

17. J. T. Jable, "Pennsylvania's Early Blue Laws: A Quaker Experiment in the Suppression of Sport and Amusement, 1682-1740," Journal of Sport History, ed. A. Metcalfe, I, 2 (Fall, 1974), 112.

18. Gerald Carson, "The Saloon," American Heritage, XIV, 3 (April, 1963), 25.

19. Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey, p. 241.

20. Ibid., p. 243.

21. J[oseph] J. W[ilman], "Bowling," Encyclopaedia Britannica (1962), III, 977.

22. H[arold] L[ester] E[sch], "Bowls," Encyclopaedia Britannica (1962), III, 981.

23. Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey, p. 151.

24. W[ill] I[rwin], "Baseball," Encyclopaedia Britannica (1962) III, 166D.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey, p. 105.

28. Walter Havighurst, "A Sword for George Rogers Clark," American Heritage, XIII, 6 (October, 1962), 60.

29. Ibid., p. 57.

30. Milton Lomask, "Benedict Arnold: The Aftermath of Treason," American Heritage, XVIII, 6 (October, 1967), 84.

31. Ella Matthew Bangs, "When Lafayette Came to Portland," Maine, My State (Lewiston, Me.: The Journal Print Shop, 1919), p. 220.

32. Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey, p. 60.

33. Ibid., p. 333.

34. Ibid., p. 99.

35. Ibid., p. 291.

36. J[ohn] P[hilip] E[nglish], "Golf," Encyclopaedia Britannica (1962), X, 500.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. C[harles] M[artin] S[peidel], "Wrestling," Encyclopaedia Britannica (1962), XXIII, 807.

40. H[enry] D[oria] T[uring], "Angling," Encyclopaedia Britannica (1962), I, 934.

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1. Bangs, Ella Matthews. "When Lafayette Came to Portland," Maine, My State, compiled by Maine Writers Research Club, Lewiston, Me.: The Journal Print Shop, 1919.

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7. E[sch], H[arold] L[ester]. "Bowls," Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1962 Vol. III.

8. Havighurst, Walter. "A Sword for George Rogers Clark," American Heritage, XIII, 6 (1962), 60.

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18. Whitney, Emmie Bailey. "Maine's First Christmas," Maine, My State, compiled by Maine Writers Research Club, Lewiston, Me.: The Journal Print Shop, 1919.

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